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# **‘That women’s writing thing you do’: Reflections on silence, writing and academic spaces<sup>1</sup>**

*Jennifer Fraser*

A fortuitous encounter with a nineteenth-century text left on my desk by a thoughtful librarian led to years of contemplating the relationships between our different selves and our research. The text – part autobiographical fiction, part scientific tract – fascinated me and took my research down unexpected paths. In my early post-PhD years, this text, the questions that it provoked and my relationship to it became emblematic of a larger set of difficulties I experienced around deciding what path to follow. More than an academic struggle, writing a PhD and making choices about what to do afterwards felt like an extended crisis of authority of voice in which I wrestled to find a mode of working that had academic and personal integrity. I needed to find a space to work where there was a fit between what I do, what I believe in and the realities of needing to earn a living. Fortunately, there would not be only one pivotal encounter in the journey. A meeting with a colleague and stumbling upon a contemporary text also would come to frame my approach to developing a career and finding congruence between my researcher, teacher, activist and personal selves. To unpick the complex process of articulating ourselves and our research, this article explores what we can understand about our gendered experiences of academia through our encounters with texts. It asks, if we understand what haunts us, what affect can this have on the decisions we make about our careers. It suggests that perhaps it is the chance readings and encounters that shape our paths as much as any well laid plans.

The first of my chance encounters was with *La evolución de Paulina: novela sociológica* (1893). Its author, Margarita Práxedes Muñoz (1862<sup>2</sup>–1909) was a nineteenth-century Peruvian scientist, medical doctor and novelist who went into academic exile in Chile and then political exile in Argentina. Without the generosity of the librarian in the Biblioteca Nacional in Lima, I would not have heard of Práxedes Muñoz as she was not referred to in any of the

documents or catalogues I consulted, nor was there any critical work on her that was readily available. As is the way of these serendipitous finds, this text stands out among all the writers that I have studied for how it openly negotiates the relationships between gender, authorship, silence and choices. Her only novel among a prolific oeuvre of scientific papers and magazine articles, it recounts a young Limeñan woman's struggle to undertake a scientific education and career, her non-socially sanctioned love affair with another scientist and her conversion to *La religión de la humanidad*, which was based in the scientific principles of Comtian positivism. The text is divided into three distinct parts which are framed as a letter from Paulina to a girlhood friend, Estela. It opens with Paulina narrating her educational and romantic experiences against the backdrop of the War of the Pacific (1879–1883). It then shifts to the voice of Father Esteban, a Jesuit priest, who explains the principles of positivist philosophy. In the final part Paulina clarifies her understanding of positivism and the possibilities it offers for social change. Throughout the text Práxedes Muñoz engages with the interlocking and oppositional discourses of gender, science, patriotism, secularism and anti-clericalism that affected the lives of nineteenth-century women and their education.

In her writing Práxedes Muñoz regularly claims the authority to speak about things outside her feminine domain and, in the process, writes the unsayable and disrupts established hierarchies of social values around gender. Her publications mostly have disappeared from the public archives in Lima and from public memory, despite being the first woman to be awarded a degree in science in Peru.<sup>3</sup> There are many reasons for this disappearance including the difficulties scholars face to locate copies of the texts, her work's lack of traditional literary merit and the fact that, for most of the twentieth century, little critical attention was paid to nineteenth-century women's writing produced in Lima, especially regarding the obstacles they faced or the transgressive nature of their writing.<sup>4</sup> Not the least of these reasons involves the complications that the novel generates for readers. It is neither easy to read nor entertaining. The switches in narrative voice and the structure of a fictional letter that contains a lecture reveal the difficulties of finding a permissible form for a woman to write about science and her own experiences. Additionally, its messages are contradictory and inconsistent, which creates difficulties for engaging in a coherent literary analysis. Nonetheless it is compelling and I return to it. Thus, when considering the relationship between self and research, I wonder why this largely unexamined and apparently unimportant text is so attractive. What brings me back repeatedly and holds my curiosity although reading it actually can be quite soporific?

I have come to understand that this Peruvian writer's concerns somehow transcend time and social space to touch on our contemporary ones. In

writing she articulates new ways of being in the social body that reject limitations based on perceptions of gender. At the same time she captures the struggles and contradictions involved in breaking imposed silences and coming to voice as a writer and scientist. She does not pretend the gendered self is unimportant to her social and academic struggles and speaks from this perspective while attempting to find new subject positions. At the same time, her life and autobiographical fiction highlight the limitations of her social world. Neither Práxedes Muñoz nor her protagonist, Paulina, are able to reconcile their scientific goals with their personal lives within the context of Lima's social elite and both end up in exile. The tensions between their desires to effect change and the realities of actual limitations cross over to challenge us in the present. It is this tension that is recognisable to those who hope the academic world might be a place of feminist activism as well as knowledge production. So while our situations and concerns may not be the same, they resonate.

The second chance encounter of my journey occurred not long after finishing a PhD when I was given career advice by a senior male colleague. While discussing which aspects of my research might provide fruitful avenues for future enquiry, he suggested, 'Well, there is always that women's writing thing you do'. Stunned into silence, I did not respond to the comment. In fact I did not speak of this experience outside of the intimacy of close friendships for a couple of years as I struggled to come to terms with what Gill (2010) has called the 'toxic shame' associated with the feeling of failure that certain types of rejection within academia produce (238–40). Nonetheless it became a liminal moment in the post-PhD decision-making process as the comment and my reaction to it provoked a crisis about the validity of my research, the location of my academic and intellectual home and, ultimately, led me to change disciplines. I will return to reflections on how I reached this decision later. For now I would like to trace through some of that reaction, not as an exercise in autobiography but as a means towards establishing a method of finding ways to use our experiences to theorise and enrich our understandings of what it means to work in a gendered academic world. In time this may help us find ways to articulate the problems that we still face around gender in academic settings and to locate strategies to cut across and through these experiences. This is important because these largely unspoken-in-public experiences frame many of our choices, take energy away from other tasks or work and can make us feel that the horizons of our choices are limited in some way. This happens even though the personal relations of our academic lives reveal that these are not singular or isolated experiences.

The remark, which likely was offhand and not intended to provoke a crisis, stayed with me for the way it gets at something that I had struggled to

articulate. While writing my PhD thesis, which was framed in part through gender studies, I was troubled by the sense that some of the writers' experiences I was researching in the nineteenth century were not so different from mine in the twenty-first century. It was as though traces of those earlier lives remained in the present. The conflicts seemed not dissimilar to the ones experienced by my peer group even though we were on the other side of decades of feminist thought and action. The idea that several years' worth of research and writing into the relationships between gender, silence, speaking out, writing and exile in the nineteenth century could be summed up as 'that women's writing thing you do' suggested that some things, which we might have expected to shift by now, perhaps have not changed as significantly as we would hope.

On the one hand, this encounter has been a very personal experience that is related to the specificities of my positioning, especially in comparison to my colleague. While privileged in some ways, I was also a younger, migrant woman who only recently had finished a PhD after a long struggle with writing, was teaching as a sessional lecturer and applying for jobs with continuing contracts (a tenure-track position in North American terms). On the other hand, it was not an isolated comment and, in conversations with friends, comparable experiences have emerged. What struck a chord at the time and which continues to resonate is the way that such a statement dismisses entire bodies of theory, research and experiences as that 'thing you do', without recognising them as part of established feminist ways of working. In doing so it continues to ghettoise work on gender as something to be done in addition to our main research and reveals a hierarchy of acceptable knowledges and research pursuits. If, as feminists, we are personally invested in our work as researchers, these comments also feel like a dismissal not just of our research but of attempts to locate and form ourselves as scholars through our research. This makes it difficult not to feel the comments personally. Finally, the comment resonated because, having spent time and intellectual energy analysing a text that had been dismissed and an author who had fought for the right to study subjects deemed unsuitable for her, only to have that work similarly dismissed, made the comment seem both personally undermining and evidence of a systemic problem.

It was the third chance encounter with a contemporary text that led to a way of conceptualising these concerns. In *Ghostly Matters* (2008) Avery Gordon describes these moments as hauntings:

those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time,

the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. ... Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us (xvi).

My encounter with Gordon's text allowed me to reflect on the interaction with my colleague and to see that it had facilitated the naming of a haunting. What was floating in the air became clear. What had been subtle and difficult to see materialised in one casual comment. Suddenly the interfaces between Práxedes Muñoz's experiences and mine seemed thin. It brought me face to face with the things I did not want to see in the discipline, namely the way perceptions of research and writing on gender and the values associated with it can organise how we work and if that work is valued. Just as Práxedes Muñoz struggled to create a space in which the content and form of her work was considered legitimate, I found myself doing the same. The encounter with Gordon's text helped me better understand my relationships to research and work and how they connect to larger questions around gender and activism.

Much of this haunting has been about silences. The ghost of Práxedes Muñoz's life and work brings to the surface the contemporary silences involved in doing research on the nineteenth century. When we can no longer access authors because much of what we want to know did not make it into the historical record, because their transgressions were erased or because they were unable to do what they wanted to do, loud silences are created. At the same time, we recognise that some of their experiences are echoed in our own in the academy, especially when our research on gender is devalued or we feel silenced. These are these places where gender, silence, the past and the present coalesce to form a haunting. Ultimately, this experience of haunting is what led to building bridges to a new position and disciplinary location. But before beginning the process of bridging I needed to examine the silences that followed my colleague's comment.

Silences are complex spaces of power and resistance. To be silenced is oppressive but there also are forms of resistance to be found in silence. In a foundational text on women's writing Tillie Olsen charts the multiple ways that women have been silenced in American literature and culture. Olsen suggests that 'these are not *natural* silences' but are 'the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot' (*italics in original*) (Olsen 6). These are cases that involve, among other things, censorship, deletions and work interrupted. In a similar vein, Adrienne Rich argues that 'the entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and

over' (11, cited in Ferguson 52). These texts consider the ways in which social, economic and political relations stifle work and enforce silences. Recognising and breaking the silences born of repressed or swallowed words can be liberating, especially in the context of not conforming to expectations based on gender or other social constructions. However, breaking silence is not always the answer and a significant body of work suggests that holding it can be freeing. These are the angry and resistant silences that have been studied in critical legal work with communities of colour or asylum seekers and in situations of intimate abuse (Johnson, 2010; Mills, 1996; Montoya, 2000). In these settings, maintaining silence becomes a radical act that contests the interpretations of others and refuses to allow experiences to be contained by language or discourse that does not reflect the experiences of those it describes. While our experiences are not the same, these strategies have helped reframe my thoughts on silence and to contemplate when and how it can form a tactic of resistance to become a chosen space instead of being imposed.

Observing my silences as they unfolded led to thinking about silences and voices and their relationships to one another. Placing them in opposition to one another had ascribed positive values to voice and negative ones to silence. However, as the literature and actions make clear, they are neither a binary nor are they mutually exclusive. In fact, we need to be careful about establishing a dualism between silence and voice because silence has multiple layers and textures and can be used in different ways to effectively communicate what voice cannot (Ferguson 49). In the same way that silent protests can have a more powerful impact than shouting in the streets, it is possible to use silence to hold spaces for refusal and to do things otherwise. When we are forced to speak or to answer, others are setting the agenda. Holding silence can remove time, energy and legitimacy from the agenda and may allow us to choose when and how to engage. Ultimately what becomes important is cultivating attentiveness to silences, whether they are being broken or held, since they tell us a great deal about the relations of power in which we exist. In turn this can help us to think through how to engage in different types of silence to create active resistant spaces in academic contexts.

These reflections on silence led to thinking about the intersections of gendered and research selves, particularly the interconnectedness between my experiences of the academic world and those of the authors I study. If we want to write about women and how they claim the authority to speak and write, then we cannot avoid the self, the work of the self or the various intersecting positions that we occupy. I began wondering what parallels existed between the authors I study and my experiences. In addition to Práxedes Muñoz, much of my research has focused on two other women, Clorinda Matto de Turner (1852–1909) and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera (1845–1909),

both contemporaries of Práxedes Muñoz and members of Lima's nineteenth-century literary elite. On the one hand, we occupy relatively privileged spaces in terms of social mobility, race and education. On the other, some of these are hard won gains, especially around the authority to speak about what we consider important or to claim that as a legitimate area of concern. For Práxedes Muñoz and her protagonist this struggle occurred on the terrain of access to a scientific education and the desire to practice medicine. As Paulina writes to Estela, 'You know the struggle which I had to insist on with my family who did not understand that a weak girl would dream of decorating her chest with Minerva's laurels, which is the exclusive patrimony of the strong sex, and you were not ignorant of how bitter my existence was before achieving the satisfaction of my legitimate aspirations' (14, translation is mine). Paulina defines the territory on which the struggle for the right to intellectual ambition takes place and asserts the legitimacy of these aspirations. It is in this space, in which public and personal lives cross over, that Práxedes Muñoz inserts her gendered and writer selves.

In contemporary life these lines are not always clear. We may find ourselves researching and teaching in a place which ostensibly supports gender equality and is committed to questioning hegemonies and access to power but which appears to give credence to particular types of academic labour and ways of knowing. The issue of how contemporary university systems function to privilege some modes of working over others is further complicated by measurement and audit cultures such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom. These mechanisms can combine with institutional funding pressures to privilege individual research portfolios over teaching and administration, as well as determine what type of research output counts as excellence. All of these factors can operate together to produce an environment in which it is difficult to create new ways of working, to be collaborative or cross-disciplinary and to find congruence between personal ethics and public performances.

Within this larger framework it is challenging to know how to make choices without the benefit of hindsight. When can we take a more a public stand on what is important to us? When do we compromise with the hope of a greater gain in the future? One of the disturbing things about my engagement with Práxedes Muñoz's text is a residual feeling of disappointment with some of the decisions the protagonist and the author make. Certain aspects of the text, such as the narration's apologetic tone, the apparent change of heart about living against the social grain and presenting much of the rational scientific argument in the voice of a male character, are unsettling for contemporary readers. These feelings are in tension with knowing that the limits of possibility are clear for these nineteenth-century women



and the decisions about both the content and form of the text are brave ones. Nonetheless they are instructive for thinking about the choices we have about asserting our voices and finding our own spaces. Perhaps what is haunting is the probability of making similar choices, of not finding ways to effect change and of not being able to be honest about the difficulties of our gendered selves in academia; in short, of allowing ourselves to be silenced instead of speaking out or choosing silence on our own terms.

The realisation that the discipline in which I had attempted to make an academic home was not necessarily the right fit prompted me to re-evaluate my priorities and ask questions about how we know which conditions for working are essential and which ones are actually more flexible. If our different selves – for example, as researcher, teacher, activist and feminist – are engaged in an integrated way, then how do we know if we need to look for a different space or attempt to find new modes of working in the same place? How do we know when to stay and fight and when to remove ourselves or relocate? This requires careful consideration about what we are hoping to build, the alliances we share and the things on which we place the most value. While some of this raises questions about how to navigate projects and forms of writing that do not fit tidy disciplinary boundaries, it is also about more than our departmental locations and includes committee and service work, research collaborations and activist projects. These ethical questions, combined with the reality of needing to earn a living and having established lives in a particular metropolitan area, make for complex decisions. Ultimately I found that, like my authors, it was better to leave known territories and find a space where what I was fighting for was not the legitimacy of my work but the time to do it.

The nineteenth-century writers whose work I find myself returning to struggle to find acceptance for the ways their gendering presses against established norms. The fight to make themselves heard is so public that it is difficult to avoid. This may have to do with historical context. In the nineteenth century the avenues available to be transgressive were big, open and public ways because they had to bridge the divide between the private domain of the “angel of the house” and the public domains of writing, science and politics. In that context, a false step seems inevitably to lead to social and political exile.<sup>5</sup> The lines of conflict seem clearer as well. Access to education, the right to self-determination and self-definition, the fight for non-religious marriage are all struggles that these authors take up in their work. Today we apparently have access to all of these things which they did not. But what if this access is not enough? What if the apparent gains are not gains at all, or partial at best? What happens when we are haunted? My research preoccupation with Práxedes Muñoz is the tangible spectre of being

haunted by the unresolved problems of gender and of the sense that our work as feminists has not achieved all that we would have hoped. Gordon suggests that haunting, as distinct from trauma, requires a response from us. It produces a 'something-to-be-done' (xvi). And this is now the task, to answer the questions of what can be done and where can we do it.

As a first step perhaps we need to accept our ghosts and allow them to lead us to new places. This choice can lead to meandering and to work that seems unproductive. It can be slow work without clearly measurable outputs. As Gordon acknowledges the places that ghosts lead us are not always easily recognisable as professional success. Instead '[t]o be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindnesses. Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located' (22). So these ghosts can also lead us to change and to new ways and conditions of working even if this is at first only manifested within ourselves and our understanding of the work. These relations also seem to be about making peace with our ghosts and letting them direct some of our work. Perhaps this will bring us to a quieter space from which to give voice to what haunts as opposed to imposed silences.

Doing this type of work has meant thinking about what I want and how some of my identities and positionings might be brought into a more integrated space or at least closer together. As the possibilities for a congruent self may not exist in our chosen discipline, sometimes a sideways step is a necessary and positive move. Regardless of whether or not we move disciplines this approach requires building bridges and alliances. It means seeking out professional relationships with people with similar commitments to feminist ways of working and spaces that value the kinds of work we do. One of my bridges led to a centre focussed on learning and teaching where I teach interesting things and have opportunities to make a positive difference in students' learning experiences. It also affords a little time to think and research, as well as sufficient space to engage in the activism around learning and feminism that is most important to me. But bridges work in two directions. So I have continued to teach a module in the department where I began, been active in professional associations and some of my research still fits within my original disciplinary training. From this perspective these shifts and changes have opened up new ways of engaging with the university as a whole and brought me into contact with practices and ways of thinking that I might not have encountered otherwise.

In this context of thinking about bridges as spaces of change and transition Gloria Anzaldúa's writing is particularly eloquent:

To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded. Effective bridging comes from knowing when to close ranks to those outside our home, group, community, nation – and when to keep the gates open (3).

Part of Anzaldúa's work here is about not closing ourselves off to those with whom we share commonalities across race and gender lines. So while the context in which Anzaldúa was writing has many differences with the one in which I am located, it also has similarities, especially if we are trying to find ways to bring together our activist and academic contexts. This piece on bridging also speaks to the difficult work of opening ourselves, risking the safety of the known and of finding new ways of working other than those encouraged by the neoliberal university. To forge new alliances, to create spaces to openly discuss our gendered experiences and to learn to work differently requires the work of bridging. Yet Anzaldúa also reminds us that 'no bridge lasts forever' and we must therefore be open to change (1). This work then is an on-going iterative process.

To conclude, it is important to open ourselves up to possibilities that are outside the paths we hold in our imaginaries. Taking space to reflect on the encounters that draw us in or trouble us, even when it is not initially clear why, can lead us to surprising places and ways of working which can be productive and liberating. This can force us to move outside of our thought patterns and to articulate our concerns in new ways, which can reveal what was underneath our earlier thinking. Equally, it is crucial to figure out what matters to us and what we value. This includes the mode of working that is meaningful to us and a place that allows us to do that work. We need to find academic and intellectual homes that are supportive. Putting up with overtly or covertly undermining comments and practices is exhausting and not actually in the interests of the academic rigour in which they sometimes masquerade. Those spaces can be found in surprising places and by connecting with people outside of our academic disciplines. Ultimately, for me, it has been about finding congruence for my different selves, which has meant listening to the ghosts that haunt me, paying attention to chance encounters and being open to the possibility that it may all change again.

## Notes

- 1 Thank you to Ana Álvarez, Mrinalini Greedharry, Stephanie Hare, Sarah Lambie and Joanne Leal who are friends and colleagues who open spaces to speak freely and whose generous sharing of experiences and wisdom have influenced the ideas presented here.
- 2 There is some debate about Práxedes Muñoz's date of birth. Denegri (1996: 125) suggests 1848. However, Tauzin Castellanos (1996: 85) and Omar de Lucia (2009: np) suggest it was circa 1862 which seems more plausible given the other events in her life.
- 3 During a research trip in 2002 I searched the National Library in Lima, the Instituto Riva-Agüero, the University of San Marcos and the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú for any material written by Práxedes Muñoz. The only texts I found were articles published in a family journal *El Perú Ilustrado*. All copies of her books and thesis had disappeared from public and university collections. Eventually I located copies of *La evolución de Paulina* and *Mis primeros ensayos* from the library at Columbia University (New York). *Mis primeros ensayos* includes a copy of her thesis so it is still possible to access it, although not in its original form.
- 4 Práxedes Muñoz receives a one-page entry in what is a classic text on the history of Peru by Basadre. However, there are no comprehensive studies of her work other than Tauzin Castellanos' comparative article on Práxedes Muñoz and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera. Her life and writing are mentioned in passing in several books and articles but none of these delve into her work as a totality. See, Basadre (1969); Denegri (1996); Tauzin Castellanos (1996); and Villavicencio (1992).
- 5 Práxedes Muñoz and Matto de Turner are exiled to Argentina, while Cabello de Carbonera dies in an asylum. The work of all three was criticised harshly by their male contemporaries. Denegri (1996) and Villavicencio (1992) chart the difficulties facing nineteenth-century Peruvian women to have careers as writers.

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